



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Voluntary Report - public distribution

Date: 3/14/2006

GAIN Report Number: E36045

EU-25

Trade Policy Monitoring

EU Food Labeling Review

2006

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Report Highlights:

The European Commission will be reviewing its entire food labeling system in 2006-2008, with concrete proposals expected in 2007. A conference organized by the Dutch Ministry for Health, Welfare & Sport and the U.K. Food Standards Agency to discuss the future of EU food labeling, already gave an indication on how difficult it will be for the Commission to find consensus between the different stakeholders. On March 10, the Commission published a consultation paper entitled "Labeling, Competitiveness, Consumer Information and Better Regulation". The outcome of the consultation paper will be used in drafting proposals for new legislation.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Brussels USEU [BE2]
[E3]

EU FOOD LABELING REVIEW

European Food Labeling Conference

In February 2006, the Dutch Ministry for Health, Welfare and Sport and the U.K. Food Standards Agency organized a conference bringing together regulators, industry representatives and consumer groups to discuss the future of food labeling. The main purpose of the conference was to create a platform for an informal discussion on the performance of current food labels and what the role of a food label should be.

The European Commission will be reviewing its entire food labeling system in 2006-2008, with concrete proposals expected in 2007. The conference already gave an indication on how difficult it will be for the Commission to find consensus between the different stakeholders. Consumer groups want everything to be on the label while the food industry finds EU labeling requirements an expensive burden.

Several presentations referred to consumer surveys which show that a large percentage of consumers make little or no use of label information or have problems understanding it. Price, brand and expiration date are most read on labels, only a third of EU consumers read the ingredients list. Consumers dislike calculations/percentages and complex graphics on labels.

The debate focused on the hierarchy of the label: what information should be considered essential on a food label and what information could be given off label. Products are becoming more complex and the space on food labels is too limited to fulfill all the needs. The EU should move away from putting every single detail on food labels. The views on the future of food labeling are very diverse. Suggestions for possible solutions included: simplification and consolidation of existing food labeling rules into a regulation instead of a directive, definition of font sizes, the use of logos and harmonized abbreviations to avoid problems on multi-lingual labels, education of consumers to help them navigate food labels and providing non-essential information off label (leaflets, free phone lines and websites). Food labels should be based on the "KISS" principle: Keep It Small and Simple.

EU Consultation Paper

On March 10, the European Commission's Health & Consumer Protection DG (DG Sanco) published a discussion paper entitled "Labeling: Competitiveness, Consumer Information and Better Regulation for the EU". This paper will be used to obtain ideas from stakeholders on ways to rethink food labeling and sets out the context for considering a change, identifies the strategic goal, and gives an overview of the current situation for specific labeling issues. The discussion paper is designed to facilitate discussion at several stakeholders meetings but individual responses are also welcome.

Questions that stakeholders are asked to address include:

- What is the most appropriate legislative instrument?
- How should the labeling provisions be brought together?
- Should alcoholic beverages be treated like all other foodstuffs regarding ingredient listing?
- Should nutrition labeling be mandatory?
- Should a general indication of "member state"/"EU"/"third country" origin be applicable to all foodstuffs?

The consultation paper can be downloaded from DG Sanco's website at http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/food/labellingnutrition/betterregulation/competitiveness_consumer_info.pdf.

Visit our website: our website <http://useu.usmission.gov/agri/> provides a broad range of useful information on EU import rules and food laws and allows easy access to USEU reports, trade information and other practical information. More information on food labeling can be found at <http://useu.usmission.gov/agri/label.html>. E-mail: AgUSEUBrussels@usda.gov.

Related reports from USEU Brussels:

Report Number	Title	Date Released
E35040	EU Proposal: Labeling of Spirit Drinks	3/7/2006
E35196	Allergen Labeling – Implementation Nov. 2005	10/6/2005
E35060	Allergen Labeling – Temporary Exemptions	3/23/2005
E35162	Food & Agricultural Import Regulations and Standards (FAIRS)	8/17/2005
These reports can be accessed through our website http://useu.usmission.gov/agri or through the FAS website http://www.fas.usda.gov/scripts/attacherep/default.asp .		